

# AUTHORITY: THE SOURCES OF ABUSE

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**T**HAT THERE ARE abuses of authority in the Christian community is lamentable but true. We are a Church of fallible human beings and authority is one area in which we show our fallibility. Examples are common enough. Not infrequently we hear of or meet pastors who stifle their parishioners or treat them like primary school children. Roman Congregations all too often deal with members of the Church in an authoritarian manner that minimizes constructive dialogue and the rightful autonomy of the local Church. The mythology of religious life abounds with horror stories of autocratic superiors who oppressed their fearful communities with their own whims and arbitrary decisions and dared to call these 'the will of God'. Abuses of authority occur at all levels and in all areas of the Christian Church's corporate life. This article, however, is not a catalogue of those abuses. They are familiar enough, and little good purpose would be served by simply listing them yet again. Instead, I am asking: what are the sources from which these abuses of authority spring?

Some misuses of authority, of course, have their roots in psychological factors, some of which are genuinely pathological, or in social trends and movements. Experts have described these causes extensively. My perspective is a different and more modest one. For some years I have been involved in spiritual guidance and religious formation, and for the past two years I have been superior of a very small Jesuit community in the east end of London. In this article I am simply reflecting on what that very limited experience has to say to me about the sources of abuses of authority in Christian communities.

We experience the Christian community as both a worldwide community, a universal Church, and as something very local: a diocese, a parish, a collection of Christians who live in adjoining streets, a base community, a family or group of families, a religious congregation, a monastery, a group of religious men or women

living in an old-fashioned 'religious house' or in the house down the street which is very much like any other. At the present time, too, forms of Christian community are changing; old forms are dying, while new ones are springing up, and these new forms bring new ways of conceiving and exercising power and authority, with corresponding new structures.

The Christian community is also always interacting with the wider society and culture in which it happens to exist, with the result that Christian models and structures of authority and power tend to reflect more or less those of the wider political and social world. Moreover, patterns of the exercise of authority in the community pass from one 'level' to another. Under an authoritarian and centralized papacy, for example, many parishes tend to be run on similar authoritarian and centralized lines. This can happen when the acceptance of authority in a parish or local church is uncritical and little reflection is given to the way in which it is exercised. But it can also happen that we use the 'higher' model of authority to justify how we use power in our own smaller community.

In this article I am also making several assumptions about the nature of authority in the Christian community. I am taking it for granted, in the first place, that the function of Christian authority is to mediate the love of God in and on behalf of the community as a whole and its individual members. The purpose of the structures and processes of authority within the Christian community is to enable God's love for the world to prevail, and thus to contribute to disclosing, sustaining and extending the reign of God. This concept of authority, as related directly to God's love and to the kingdom of God, seems to me to make it very different from political power and authority outside the Christian community. My second assumption is that in their concept and exercise of authority within the community Christians are called to be prophetic. That is to say, Jesus offers us in the gospels alternative models of the exercise of power and authority that are different from and critical of those in operation in society and politics generally.

And Jesus called them to him and said to them, 'You know that those who are supposed to rule over the gentiles lord it over them and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must

be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10,42-45 and cf parallel in Mt 20,25-28).

Authority in the Christian community is a ministry, a service. Edmund Hill describes what he calls 'ministerial authority' neatly:

Authority ordinarily means the power to give commands and to enforce them; to lay down the law with little expectation of being gainsaid; to wield influence, to control, to rule, to guide effectively. Ministry . . . means simply to serve. In fact it means the opposite of authority; it means carrying out commands, accepting law as laid down by others, being ruled, controlled and influenced, or at most being an instrument through which the possessor of authority exercises influence, control and rule . . . The authority of Christ himself, and therefore of all who share in it, is an authority *only* for the sake of service; an authority to wash the feet of the disciples; an authority to care for others, to consider their interests; an authority to give his life as a ransom for many.<sup>1</sup>

A third assumption is the fact that for decades, and perhaps even centuries, it has been normal for authority to be exercised in an authoritarian way in the Roman Catholic Church. The community has been divided between those who command (the hierarchy) and those who listen and unquestioningly obey (the laity). Authority has been in the hands of a self-perpetuating oligarchy claiming divine right and not subject to democratic control. Goodness in the community has often been identified with passive obedience and conformity, while dissent has been unflinchingly pursued and excoriated. This state of affairs tends to encourage a childish, immature attitude to authority on the part of those who exercise it as well as those who are subject to it. In the Roman Catholic Church, even after Vatican II, adult relationships which make the exercise of authority a matter between mature equals have been slow to develop. In this atmosphere it is difficult for Catholics not to have an 'authority problem' of some kind.<sup>2</sup>

One result of this, of course, is that abuses of authority stem not only from those who exercise it but also from those who are subject to authority: because of their inability, for instance, to bear responsibility and freedom in an adult manner; or, at the other extreme, because of their tendency to see any authority whatever

as an encroachment on their personal freedom and to react aggressively to it, as some adolescents do. In this article my focus is mainly on those who are entrusted with the exercise of authority. But we should not lose sight of the fact that, if our authority structures are operating badly, the cause may also lie in the incapacities of those who are subject to authority.

### *Inappropriate models*

If we reflect on abuses of authority, it becomes clear that one of the common sources of abuse in the Christian community is the adoption of inappropriate models of authority. In religious communities and monasteries, the Rule or Constitutions by which the members structure their lives offer their own models of authority. The Rule of St Benedict, for example, contains guidelines about how the abbot and the monks are to behave towards each other, and the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus describe structures and processes for the exercise of authority within the order. In such cases it is intended that authority be entrusted only to those who will exercise it for the common good according to the prescribed guidelines. In more varied and less structured Christian communities such as a parish the exercise of authority can be a far more haphazard affair. In many countries most diocesan clergy expect eventually to be in charge of a parish, whether their personal gifts equip them to exercise authority or not. And a variety of models, even sometimes in conflict with one another, may struggle for recognition. One section of the parish, for instance, may take for granted a very hierarchical concept of Christian authority while another wants to stress the equality of all in the community.

Abuses of authority in Christian communities sometimes occur because the members of the community have simply not thought through very thoroughly the question of whether the models that they have in fact adopted are appropriate. The structures of authority in a diocese or parish may be found, on reflection, not to be suited to that particular time and place. What works fairly well in rural Ireland is often very damaging to a community when it is transferred to London's stockbroker belt!

But Christian authority is also based on theological models: concepts of Church, ministry, hierarchy and so on, that vary according to age and culture. In certain cases, abuses of authority can be traced to the fact that the theology, especially the theology of Church, laity and ministry, that underlies the exercise of

authority is inappropriate, outmoded, inadequate. Vatican II put forward for the present age a 'ministerial collegiality' model of papal and episcopal authority based on the renewed theology of the Church that is enshrined in the Council's documents.<sup>3</sup> At the level of the exercise of authority in the worldwide Church, this concept has not yet been put into practice, and the Roman Curia, which at present controls many of the structures of authority, appears to take little account of many of the developments in Roman Catholic life, ministry and theology that Vatican II instigated. In all kinds of Christian community abuses of authority can often be traced to inappropriate or conflicting theological understandings of Church, leadership and ministry.

#### *Loss of a contemplative dimension*

As Christians, the gospel urges us to exercise authority in ways that are prophetic and different from those who 'lord it over' others 'among the pagans' (Mk 10,42). In order to do this we need to 'put on' the mind and heart of Christ. Our attitudes and dispositions need to be formed and fed by frequent contemplation and reflection on the gospel. 'In contemplation the spirit of Jesus acts powerfully and efficaciously within us, causing us to grow in the life that makes us like Christ.'<sup>4</sup> It is not by chance that Ignatius Loyola insisted that a Jesuit superior's first responsibility towards his community is his own 'familiarity with God in prayer'.

The loss or lack of this contemplative dimension seems to me one of the main sources of abuse of authority among Christians. Contemplation shapes us according to the gospel. Without contemplation it is difficult for us to exercise authority in the prophetic way that is called for by the gospel. If our lives lack or lose a contemplative dimension, there is a grave danger that our exercise of authority will not embody the attitudes and values which Jesus lived by. It is likely to become simply an administrative task or an exercise of power, rather than a prophetic Christian ministry.

#### *Low self-evaluation*

I said at the start of this article that it was not mainly about the psychological roots of abuse. There is, however, one aspect of our present day psychological make-up which seems to lie at the root of some abuses of authority among Christians, and that is the connection between our exercise of authority and the image that

we have of ourselves as individuals. In particular a low self-evaluation on the part of a person in authority can be a source of often unconscious abuses of that authority.

The concept of 'self-image', of course, has become part of popular psychology and spirituality. Self-image is the image that each one of us has of ourselves. It is 'a complicated and intricate mental production' which we create for ourselves by a process of self-definition.<sup>5</sup> It is 'an ongoing composite of conscious and unconscious conceptions and feeling-tones that are identified as the sense of "me"'.<sup>6</sup>

Self-image always includes an evaluation of oneself, usually in relation to others. In fact 'self-image has come to *mean* self-evaluation in popular understanding',<sup>7</sup> and saying that individuals have a 'poor self-image' usually means that they speak and behave in a way that indicates a low evaluation of themselves in comparison with their evident evaluation of other people (and usually of God). It is worth noting, too, that many people are unaware of what they think of their own worth. It is often only through conscious attempts at reflection, or through spiritual direction, counselling or psychotherapy, that they become aware that they are carrying round with them a 'poor self-image' which affects almost all that they say and do.

A habitual 'poor self-image', which involves a distorted sense of one's true worth in relation to other people and to the world at large, can affect the exercise of authority in a Christian community in several ways and easily leads to abuse. If I habitually have a poor image of my own value, I am likely to try to find a recognized place in a community or group by attempting to please as many people as possible. I cannot take for granted my own acceptance by others. Whether I am aware of it or not, I believe that I cannot be accepted on the grounds of my own intrinsic worth. My behaviour towards others in the group, then, is dictated by the need to please, because I imagine that this is necessary in order to earn acceptance.

If, moreover, I am in a position of authority in the community, the danger is that my exercise of authority will in fact be a continual if unconscious attempt to please or placate as many people as possible, in order to preserve harmony and be accepted by the community. This is an abuse of authority on at least two counts. Firstly it is an abuse of myself as the person in authority because I risk neglecting my own genuine needs and even submerging my

own identity and integrity for the sake of making sure everyone else is pleased. It is an abuse also because mediating the love of God is not the same as pleasing as many people as possible. Discernment, objectivity, challenge, confrontation and a restraining hand are also sometimes necessary. If I am driven by a need to earn acceptance by pleasing, I will find these extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Another difficulty in this predicament is the fact that a course of action that is in fact damaging to ourselves and to others can actually appear not only justifiable but commendable on Christian grounds. We read that authority in the Christian community means service, ministry. And a way of exercising authority by which, at some cost to ourselves, we try to make sure that everyone is pleased and the community treads a smooth path can appear to be true, self-forgetful Christian service. In fact, however, genuine Christian service is both discerning and free, and to be driven to please everyone by the demands of a poor self-image often lacks both discernment and the freedom to carry out what is truly best in the circumstances.

Further reflection suggests another way in which a poor self-image adversely affects the exercise of authority in a community. It is a characteristic of a person with a low self-evaluation to be unhappy about allowing others the scope and freedom to exercise their own gifts. People whose habitual sense of their own worth is very negative regularly compare themselves with others in their own minds and usually come off worse in the comparison. When they are in authority in a group or community, they often see other people's gifts as a source of fear and envy and as a threat to their own wellbeing and their own position. Other people's gifts only serve to reinforce their own negative evaluations of themselves. Their instinctive reaction is to exercise excessively tight control in the community; to insist, often angrily, on a single 'right' way of conducting affairs; to be unwilling to allow others in the community to be different and to exercise their gifts in freedom; to be more ready to forbid than to encourage and enable. In this way authority is abused and the community can be stifled.

### *Disabling fear*

Experience in spiritual direction bears out the view, often expressed in Christian spiritual writing, that one of the most disabling and debilitating influences in the Christian life and in ministry is

fear. We grow as Christians and as human beings when 'love casts out fear' (1 Jn 4,16); when we can trust in the God who loves us unconditionally, and who so loved the world that he sent his only son . . . that the world might be saved. Fear eats away at that trust. And the monsters and chimeras, real or imagined, that inspire fear are legion. Some of us are afraid of the past, others of the present or the future. There is fear of the unknown and fear of the known; fear of change and fear of stability; fear of the familiar as well as of the alien; fear of what is inside oneself and fear of what is external; fear of life, fear of death; fear of self, fear of others, fear of God. And very often, much of the fear that we constantly carry about with us is unacknowledged, precisely because we are also afraid of the possible consequences of recognizing it. It influences our conduct, but we are unaware of it until we begin to reflect on how we act in particular circumstances and what our behaviour is in fact expressing.

In those of us to whom some authority in the community has been entrusted, fear, especially unacknowledged fear, is very disabling and can lead to abuse. Naturally different kinds of fear give rise to different kinds of abuse. If I am afraid of an angry God, and this is not balanced out by trust, I am likely to be afraid of responsibility, over-meticulous, unable to make decisions and stifling in my treatment of others. The reason is that the fear-inspiring image of an angry God that is habitual with me increases my anxiety and makes it very difficult for me to relax control and allow scope to others. A God who is mainly angry does not rejoice in people's freedom.

One of the most disabling forms of fear among people with authority in the Roman Catholic community at present is that of loss of status. Again it is often unrecognized by those who are afflicted by it, but nonetheless influential in what they say and do. It is a fear which afflicts clergy and religious in particular, and it is perhaps one of the chief reasons for the present slowness of development in some parish communities and ministries. It is also tied up, of course, with some of the common theological models of authority that I mentioned earlier. For a long time, ordination has been understood as conferring power and authority, and the parochial models of ordained ministry that we have accepted and lived with have reinforced that view. We have lost sight of the fact that authority in the Christian community means service, ministry, rather than power and command, and some ordained men have



grown used to acting as despots in their own parishes. Sadly, younger candidates for ordination are also often attracted by this behaviour. Now that times are changing and new insights into the nature of ordained ministry are being implemented, many in authority fear a loss of status.

To think of this as a matter of little consequence, as a question of simply 'coming down a peg or two', accepting a small demotion, would be to underestimate badly its importance for individuals and for the community. For many, their personal identity is inextricably bound up with the status and authority that ordination or 'being a religious' has been seen to confer in the past. The fear of losing this status and the authority that goes with it undermines their personal identity itself, because they do not have an identity apart from that status. Fear of loss and change is provoking a profound spiritual crisis in individual people and as a consequence in the wider community.

In these circumstances, then, certain abuses of authority evidently have their roots in fear. Increasing participation by lay people in the Church's life often seems like a creeping encroachment on authority that threatens to swell into a flood. The fear of loss of status and even identity that this provokes inspires in some people a sharp reaction which sometimes takes the form of increasing assertions of authority, dictatorial behaviour and repression of others' initiatives.

I wish to return briefly now to the idea of 'self-image'. In practice, a habitual low self-evaluation is often accompanied by fear, and the two together can be the source of abuses of authority. Fear is the reverse side of the need or desire to please that a poor self-image engenders. A person who has a distorted, low sense of his or her own worth is constantly afraid of not being acceptable, of being rejected by others, and sometimes even expects such treatment as a normal part of life. When such a person is entrusted with authority, fear can dictate how that authority is exercised. The presence of fear of offending others in the group or community, fear of conflict, fear of rejection means that personal integrity, which is necessary for exercising authority, is suppressed or greatly compromised. In the event, unfortunately, authority in the group is likely to pass to those who inspire the greatest fear. Or else the person in whom the authority is supposed to be vested reacts against the feeling of rising panic by becoming rigid, inflexible,

angry and irrational in the way in which he or she tries to hold on to and exercise authority.

*Spiritual desolation*

When we reflect on our day-to-day experience, on how we think and feel about God and the things that have to do with God, on our affective responses to God's presence and action, we recognize the obvious fact that, sometimes even in the course of quite a short space of time, we experience considerable changes of feeling: 'ups' and 'downs', 'highs' and 'lows', movements of 'positive' and 'negative', creative and destructive feeling. Here I am talking about 'the heart', the deeper affective currents that really make a difference to how we act and live, the affective states and movements from which our most personal actions spring, rather than the more superficial emotions that quickly come and go.

Christian spiritual guidance about discernment attaches considerable importance to these different affective states and movements and to our attitudes and actions that accompany or spring from them. What is important here, however, is not so much where the feelings spring *from* but rather the direction in which they are leading us. Experiences of what the tradition calls 'spiritual consolation' are those which are leading us to a fuller and deeper faith and a growth in Christian love for others. The opposite kinds of feeling, which lead us rather towards a sense of meaninglessness or emptiness, towards a diminishment or even loss of those same qualities of faith and love, are what the tradition calls 'spiritual desolation'.

This brings us to the point of reflecting on the experience of spiritual desolation as a source of abuses of authority in the Christian community. Many of us who take the following of Jesus and a life of discipleship seriously live for much of the time with an often unspoken belief in the presence of a God who loves the world and humanity unconditionally. We do not advert to this belief all the time, but it is with us as one of the main foundations on which our lives are built. And so we exist much of the time in a state of 'consolation', when our lives are largely coherent with this belief. There are times, however, when God seems to be absent; when life seems to have lost its meaning; when we withdraw into ourselves instead of opening out in love to others; when our convictions about God's unconditional love for us and for the world seem to have been shaken or to have dissolved completely, like so many bubbles. We experience a loss of a sense of God's creative,

saving love as the underlying condition of life, prayer and action. Sometimes we can identify quite easily the causes of this 'desolation': it may be a neglect of responsibility, fatigue, depression, stress and so on which keep us on this downward spiral. At other times, however, reflection unearths no obvious cause. This is how we feel: it just seems to have happened.

For those of us who are in authority in the community, the experience of desolation rings warning bells. If we follow it out in our actions, desolation moves us in a direction away from God. It touches our deepest attitudes and the wellsprings of our personal choices and actions; it has an adverse effect upon our judgement and our behaviour towards other people; it leads to courses of action which are not so much creative as potentially harmful to ourselves and others and against the best interests of all. Consequently, the experience of spiritual desolation can have a damaging effect on our exercise of authority: it can bring, at least temporarily, a bleak and cynical outlook on life in which the lights of faith and hope have grown dim; it is liable to close us in on ourselves, to lead us to judge others harshly and wrongly; it can draw us into being manipulative rather than generous, power-seekers and oppressors rather than ministers.

The workings of these experiences of desolation are often quite subtle. Sometimes they are known only later by the harmful fruits they produce. When they are upon us, we can easily be reluctant to recognize them, and it is often only by consistently taking time for reflection on our experience and for spiritual guidance that we know how and to what extent we are affected by them. Otherwise, all we are aware of is being subject to seemingly inexplicable pendulum-swings of mood which we may be tempted to justify by throwing the blame on to someone else; or we try to cover over the inner darkness by a flurry of busy activity. Those of us who are called upon to exercise Christian authority on behalf of the community need to be aware of these deeper moods and currents of feeling and of their effects on our attitudes and behaviour, so as to ensure that they do not lead to abuses of authority. If authority is a prophetic ministry, the community needs leaders who practise discernment of spirits.

#### *A more mature spirituality*

In this article we have looked at some of the roots of abuse of authority in the Christian community. While it is true that in some

cases the abuse can be traced to the attitudes and behaviour of those over whom authority is exercised, this article has in fact focussed mainly on the sources of abuse in the leaders, the people to whom authority is entrusted. I have argued that, although the sources of abuse of authority are often psychological factors such as a low self-evaluation, these cannot be separated from other causes such as inappropriate models of authority and more especially spiritual immaturity and inadequate spiritual formation. If this analysis is correct, it suggests that the remedy for abuses of authority lies in two directions apart from the psychological. On the one hand a more adequate theological education would help us to clarify the nature of Christian authority and to use more appropriate models and structures. But an equally urgent need is for a more mature formation in spirituality for those people who are entrusted with authority and leadership.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Hill, Edmund: *Ministry and authority in the Catholic Church* (Geoffrey Chapman, London, 1988), pp 11-12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf further Dominian J.: *Authority: a Christian interpretation of the psychological evolution of authority* (Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1976).

<sup>3</sup> Cf Edmund Hill, *op. cit.*, chapters 8 and 9.

<sup>4</sup> Galilea, Segundo: *The way of living faith: a spirituality of liberation* (Collins, London, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> May, Gerald G.: *Will and spirit: a contemplative psychology* (Harper and Row, 1982), p 104.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p 334.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p 104.